

Editorial

Introduction to the Special Issue on “Religions in African-American Popular Culture”

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This Special Issue on “Religions in African-American Popular Culture” puts the concepts of religion and popular culture in dialogue (Cobb 2005; Greeley 1988; Hinds et al. 2006; Lynch 2005; Spencer 1989, 1991b; Tillich 1959). On a basic level, cultural products are “popular” when they arouse pleasure and produce enjoyment in a person. On a more comprehensive level, as a social domain of daily life in historical, contemporary, and emergent cultures, popular culture (past, present, and future) has four defining characteristics: popular culture (1) actualizes, engenders, or signifies pleasure and good; (2) is based on the beliefs, values, and norms (real or imagined) of the people who experience it; (3) is expressed in visible, audible, and performative artifacts (icons and personas) and practices (arts and rituals); and (4) groups, organizations, and institutions situate popular culture within gendered, racialized, political, and economic contexts.

Black popular culture is a form of popular culture. Black popular culture’s defining characteristics are the beliefs, values, orality, musicality, and norms of people of Africana descent. British cultural theorist Stuart Hall asserts that the word “Black” in the term “Black popular culture” signifies the following:

[B]lack community (the site or location of the experiences, pleasures, memories, and everyday practices of black people) and the persistence of the black experience (the historical experience of black people in the diaspora), of the black aesthetic (the distinctive cultural repertoires out of which popular representations were made), and of the black counternarratives [Blacks have] struggled to voice. (Hall 1992, p. 28)

Artist and cultural critic bell hooks affirms that Black popular culture continues to be a “vital location for the dissemination of black thought” and that it is a location where “useful critical dialogues can and should emerge” (Hooks 1992, p. 51).

As scholarship, particularly in the history field, has demonstrated over the last 60 years, religion, which disseminates cultural thought, is a location where critical dialogues emerge, and relates to community, experience, aesthetics, and counternarratives, is significant to African-American culture (Berry and Blassingame 1982; Levine 1977; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Raboteau 1978). Sociologist William Edward Burghardt DuBois was the first to acknowledge a connection between religion and African-American popular culture in 1897 in his essay “The Problem of Amusement”. DuBois did not label the phenomenon he was pondering as Black popular culture but, rather, as Black “amusements” (“The Problem” DuBois [1897] 2000, p. 19). Amusement was the term used by scholars and journalists to refer to leisure and recreational pursuits in nineteenth-century America. Popular culture did not enter the lexicon of American scholarship and periodicals until after World War II (see Hinds et al. 2006). DuBois’s concerns about the widening gap between young African Americans and religion due to their participation in urban Black popular culture at the beginning of the twentieth century is still relevant in the twenty-first century. However, DuBois did not explore the theological and religious implications

of Black American interaction and engagement *with* the popular culture of their day. It is this gap that this Special Issue on “Religions in African-American Popular Culture” seeks to fill.

Scholarship on African-American music and the intersections of religion specifically concentrating on examining African-American music theologically is the most plentiful in the existing literature. As shown in the references, many studies since the early 1980s have drawn a connection between religion and African-American religious music (Cone [1972] 1991; Dett [1936] 1991; DuBois [1903] 1969; Graham 2018; Harvey 1986; Nelson 2018a, 2018b; Pollard 2008; Spencer 1990), between religion and popular music (Gilmour 2005; Häger 2018), between religion and African-American popular music (DeSilva 1989; Dyson 1991a; Jones 1989; Pollard 1989a; Pollard 1989b; Spencer 1993; Trulear 1989; Wimberley 1989), and between religion and rap music (Dyson 1991b; Hodge 2010; Johnson 2013; Miller and Pinn 2015; Moody 2012; Nelson 1991; Royster 1991; Spencer 1991a; Utley 2012). This tradition of writing theologically on African-American music dates back at least to 1894 with Henry Hugh Proctor’s “The Theology of the Songs of the Southern Slave”, his Bachelor of Divinity degree thesis at the Yale School of Divinity. Proctor proposes that the songs of the southern slaves contain “religious and theological truth”, that the “perceptive scholar” may be able to discover “a system of belief” in these “intricacies of thought”, and that his thesis formulates “a system of theologico-religious conceptions” from such songs (Proctor [1894] 1988, p. 52). Proctor’s findings were affirmed by other religious studies scholars as an increasing number of studies over the succeeding decades examined African-American music from religious and theological perspectives. Proctor’s early findings and assertions about the study of African-American music are still relevant today. Indeed, the emerging scholarship on Black music and religion inspired Jon Michael Spencer to found *Black Sacred Music*, a journal of theomusicology, in 1987. For nearly 10 years, *Black Sacred Music* opened and maintained a scholarly space for a discussion of religion and theology in Black music in particular and Black culture in general.

Little research has examined the intersection of religion and other artifacts or practices of Black popular culture alongside the abundance of research on Black music and religion (see Martin 2014; Whitted 2009). This Special Issue on “Religions in African-American Popular Culture” begins to fill this gap. The articles in this Special Issue specifically examine the role of religions in African-American popular literature, theater, film, television, and comic art. The essays illuminate religious issues and imageries, representations and characterizations, and theological themes and expound upon “theologico-religious conceptions”, “systems of belief”, and “religious and theological truths” in historical and contemporary African-American popular culture. In “Looking for Black Religions in 20th Century Comics, 1931–1993”, Yvonne Chireau explores the relationship between religion and comics, a generally unexplored relationship in scholarly literature. This article provides a brief history of Black religions in comic books, cartoons, animation, and comic strips, examining African-American Christianity, Islam, African diasporan religions, and folk traditions. Chireau shows that African-American comic creators contested stereotypical depictions of race and religion in American popular culture by offering alternatives in their treatment of Black religious themes.

Robin R. Means Coleman and Novotny Lawrence in “Fix It Black Jesus: The Iconography of Christ in *Good Times*” focus on “Thank You Black Jesus”, a season-one episode centering on the Evanses’ eldest son J.J.’s painting of Black Jesus—an artistic interpretation that departs significantly from Western artistic depictions of Jesus dating back to mid-third century AD. Coleman and Lawrence argue that “Thank You Black Jesus” begs several important questions surrounding religious and secular symbols, the interpellation and hailing of Blackness, and faith.

In “Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*”, James Mellis argues that both novels invoke African-based spirituality in order to create literary sites of resistance, both within the narrative of the respective novels and within American culture at large. By drawing on a tradition of authors using African-based spiritual practices, particularly Voodoo, Hoodoo, Conjure, and Rootwork, Mellis shows

how Whitehead and Ward enter and engage in a tradition of African-American protest literature based on African spiritual traditions.

In “Tyler Perry and the Rhetoric of Madea: Contrasting Performances of Perry’s Leading Lady as She Appears on Stage and Screen”, Katherine Whitfield and Andre E. Johnson explore the rhetorical aspects of religion in Tyler Perry’s play *Madea Goes to Jail* (2006) and film *Madea Goes to Jail* (2009). Whitfield and Johnson argue that the form and function of violence, religion, and wisdom narrative as used by Madea, the starring character, demonstrate how the character and the character’s performances differ from stage to screen, thus imparting different messages.

Although examining religions within African-American popular culture may appear to be a contradictory scholarly exercise, the papers in this Special Issue demonstrate that Black American popular culture is a significant arena for the expression of African-American cultural thought and consciousness related to religion. Ultimately, I believe that the articles in this Special Issue will increase our understanding of the ways in which religions and African-American popular culture are interconnected and will comprise a foundation upon which further scholarship will explore African-American popular cultural production and religions outside of the areas sampled here.

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